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ABSTRACT

This paper, supporting father involvement in pregnancy, birth, and infant care, recommends that the father 1) acknowledge and accept the emotional impact of pregnancy and share this with his mate, and 2) mentally visualize himself in childbearing and childrearing roles. It suggests that multiple benefits accrue to all involved when the father participates in childbirth procedures and that the effects of active father involvement in infant rearing are "without a doubt positive." Fifty-two supporting books and articles are cited in the text and are listed alphabetically (by author) in the "References" section which comprises one-third of the paper. (MQ)

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Father Involvement During Pregnancy, Birth, and Infancy

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Abstract

Very little has been written on father participation in the very first stages of child development - pregnancy, delivery, and infancy. This article is addressed to the question of how fathers can be actively involved in this period.

Interest in the subject of fathering has been growing in recent years, but there appears to be little concern for fathers who just want to be better fathers, especially during the crucial, very early stages - pregnancy, birth, and infancy. There are still very few resources for a father to draw upon to increase both the quality and quantity of his participation during this period. Also, unfortunately, much of what has been written on fathering has come from negative, or at least unusual, situations such as father absence or paternal child abuse. This information may be valuable but is not of much use to a father who is both present and trying to be healthily involved. More recently, there have been some very good things written on single fathering, much of which is applicable to all fathers, but the father-child relationship is still only a part of the total picture of family dynamics. This paper, then, is addressed to those fathers who want simply to be the best fathers they can be from the very beginning - the moment of conception.

Pregnancy

How can a father be actively and healthily involved in pregnancy? Much has been written on how the period of pregnancy affects fathers, but most of it concerns the negative or unhealthy effects.[15,19,47] We mustn't get trapped, however, into thinking that these are inevitable

components of pregnancy and that fathers are forever doomed to nine months of misery. The period of pregnancy can be a time of great personal growth for fathers.[42]

Being pregnant is a profound emotional experience,[33] and the opportunity to share in this is a chance to experience interpersonal intimacy on a level that not many people ever achieve. This is also a time of great potential for intrapersonal growth; a unique opportunity for a man to get in touch with tender, nurturant feelings he may not have known before. In fact, Biller[1] believes that human males have a father instinct, and the period of pregnancy is the time for a father to begin to fulfill these instinctual drives.

There are many ways for a father to get involved during pregnancy, but there appear to be two activities that are most important.[35] One is for the father to acknowledge and accept the emotional impact of pregnancy and to share this with his mate. Several studies, including one done cross-culturally, have found that men who allow themselves to be open emotionally and physically to the pregnancy experience and are able to talk about the gentle, fatherly feelings that are being elicited in them not only have a more positive experience during pregnancy, but also become more actively involved with their infants after birth.[35,37]

The second thing a pregnant father should do is to mentally visualize himself as an active participant in both

childbearing and childrearing. He should actively explore the role he wants to fulfill as a father and, again, openly discuss this with his mate. It has been found that this process of mental visualization is what many pregnant women do, and if a father wants to be included later on, it is important that he get himself included during this period. Also, it has been found that men who visualize themselves as active fathers do, in fact, become more active fathers.[35]

Involvement and participation during pregnancy, then, can be a unique growing experience for a father. We mustn't forget, however, that an active, involved father also affects two other people involved in the pregnancy - the mother and the child. The father's concern and involvement greatly affects the health of the mother which, in turn, greatly affects the health of the developing child. Loesch and Greenberg[30] found many years ago that when the husband was active and involved, pregnancy went more smoothly. This finding has gained even more support in recent years,[2] as Dr. Irwin Chabon emphasizes when he says of the father-to-be, "Here is the fellow who will determine to a large extent the ease with which his wife will proceed through her pregnancy. His help, sympathy, and understanding are of incalculable value in sustaining the emotional health of his pregnant wife."[3] And the effect of the emotional, as well as physical, health of a pregnant woman on the developing

fetus is a fact that has been demonstrated innumerable times.[13]

Birth

With the increasing occurrence of natural childbirth and fathers being allowed in the delivery room, interest in the father's participation in this crucial event has grown immensely. What, then, is the father's role while his wife is giving birth? How can he be actively involved when he is obviously excluded from the physiological birthing process?

The positive effect on the mother of the father's presence during delivery is now well known.[2] Physiologically, it has been found that husband participation in labor and delivery decreases both the experience of pain and the probability of medication.[13,46] The findings are even more positive concerning the psychological effects of husband presence and participation. Dr. Clement Yahia, the first American obstetrician to systematically study the effects of the Lamaze method of childbirth states, "The role of the husband in giving support to his wife's labor is of inestimable value to her emotionally."[51] Dr. Robert Bradley, a pioneer in the areas of natural childbirth and husband participation in delivery, and the founder of the Bradley method of natural childbirth, has for thirty years stressed the importance of the father's presence and involvement during labor and delivery.[2] And Deborah Tanzer, after an

extensive study of deliveries, summed up her findings by saying, "The husband's presence would seem a crucial factor in making childbirth a psychologically positive time."[46] Maybe the most surprising finding on the effect of the father's presence during delivery, however, comes from Abraham Maslow, who found that many women described childbirth as a "peak experience", something akin to spiritual bliss or ecstasy; but that this occurred only when husbands were present.[34]

How is the child affected by all of this? If a father's presence and participation in the birthing process facilitates a less stressful and generally easier delivery, then there are benefits to be derived by the infant also, as the ease of birth has a great effect on the later health and development of a child.[2,8,27,43]

In recent years, it has even been possible for fathers to be present at cesarean births, and there is strong evidence that even in this highly stressful and often unexpected situation the father's presence can be of great value to everyone involved. One California pediatrician who has been involved in many such births says, "The benefits of the father's being intimately involved in the cesarean delivery extend to all those involved. Mothers get an extra bastion of support to face what, in many cases, is an unknown and frightening experience. Fathers get the

benefit of feeling vital and important to the whole process and calmer and more relaxed in the first-hand knowledge of what has occurred. Infants get the benefit of more contented and closer parents, and who knows what that may mean in the future. Even the doctors benefit from observing firsthand what this delivery means to the entire family."[6] These benefits are just as much a part of father-included natural births.

What effect does father participation in delivery have on the father and the father-child relationship? Very little research has been done in this area, but the evidence that exists clearly shows that fathers who participate in their child's birth are positively affected.[5,10,29,39] Greenberg and Morris,[10] in the most extensive and creative research done on this topic, use the word engrossment to describe a phenomenon that could also be described as father-infant bonding. They found that the greater the early contact with the infant, the more likely it is that engrossment will occur and that the first hour after birth may be a critical period for this bond to be established. They also found that the engrossed father has an increased sense of self-esteem and worth, and that a father who is engrossed with the infant early is more likely to be involved with his developing child.

There is even evidence now of sibling-infant bonding, and the Hathaways[11] have written a very powerful book on the

importance of siblings being present at birth. In most places, this is possible now only with home births, but hopefully that will change in the future, just as it did with husbands.

Giving birth can be a beautiful, moving experience for everyone involved. While we may never know exactly how all those included are affected, it is becoming increasingly clear that these few hours may be a critical time for the establishment of healthy relationships that can last throughout life. A father who misses out on this may never be able to make up for what he loses; may never even realize how much less his involvement and relationships are than that which they could be. A father who is included in this moment, however, may be moved in such a positive way that there will then be no doubt as to his caring and involvement from that point on.

Infancy

A father who has been actively involved in pregnancy and birth is now ready to be an active participant in caretaking and interacting with his infant. Recent studies indicate that there are few inherent differences between fathers' and mothers' ability to nurture and take care of an infant.[24,40] A father who truly wants to be a significant figure in the development of his infant can do so, and this kind of committment is healthy for the father, the infant,

and even the mother.[7,22,38]

There have been many studies investigating father-infant relationships, with infants ranging between the ages of eight months and two years.[4,20,22,23,25,26,44,49,50] All of these studies have reached several similar conclusions:

1) there exists a phenomenon that can best be described as father-infant attachment.
2) there are few sex-attributable differences between father-infant attachment and mother-infant attachment.
3) the strength and quality of the father-infant attachment is related to the quantity and quality of the involvement of the father with his infant.

Another benefit of active father involvement in infancy is derived by the mother and, indirectly, by the infant. Much is now known about the negative effects of the stress of 24-hour-a-day parenting.[12,16,17,18,36,48,52] The extent of these negative effects varies greatly across personalities and situations, from irritability to abuse, but it is clearly not a healthy situation for anyone when only one parent is parenting. When two parents share the responsibility, and the joy, of infant caretaking, the quality of the parent-infant interaction greatly increases and everyone benefits including, of course, the infant.

What are the effects of an actively involved father on the development of the child? Although much research has been done on father absence, little research has been done on father presence and involvement. People knowledgeable about both child development and parenting have written on the subject, however, and they all agree that the effects are complex and varied but are without a doubt positive.[1,9,31,45]

Why, then, are fathers so often left out of this process of infant caretaking and development? The reasons are too complex to be delineated simply, but we can examine some of the more common and visible factors.[14,21,29,32,41]

One common reason for a father's lack of involvement with his infant is simply lack of knowledge on his part that he can be involved and that there are numerous benefits to both himself and others of his involvement. Our culture is not one that actively encourages father-infant interaction and, in fact, in many ways discourages it. A father gets pressure to fulfill certain sex-stereotypic roles from many places - the mass media, the legal system, his place of employment, the education system, his peers and social group, his family, the economic system, and on and on. There is even an historical precedence derived from the supposedly scientifically-based notion that mothers are somehow innately better suited for infant caretaking. This pressure is so great that many men are even pressured by wives who seem to prefer them to be nonparticipants in this activity and

encourage them to stay in the role that has been prescribed for them. But all of this can be overcome by a father who is determined to take his rightful place in the father-mother-infant triad - that of an actively involved, equal participant in the care and development of his child.

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